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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data collected in a national evaluation, this paper explores the contribution of Frontline Management Initiative (FMI) to the practice of management learning in selected enterprises in Australia. (A competence-based management development strategy, FMI places learning in an organization and links management performance to the achievement of business outcomes.) Initially, some discourses on management and learning are presented as background to this exploration. The argument is made that "identity work" is central to FMI. Excerpts from participants' accounts indicate managers not only learn to manage by means of acquiring or demonstrating skills, but also by negotiating particular types of identity for themselves with respect to managing, e.g. business manager, strategic manager, and "high performing manager." Managers are also shown to assume certain kinds of social roles proposed for them in standards set for achieving competency in front line management, although some participants in the program are shown extending these roles and indicating that front line management can be conceived and practiced in a variety of ways. In analyzing these participants' accounts of the FMI, the authors say that what emerges is a more complex image of managers actively exploring the indistinctness of their role boundaries and constructing various identity positions, including business manager, strategic manager, coach, educator, learning leader, professional developer, and organizational developer. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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Identity matters: learning and managing at the frontline

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The last two decades have witnessed a number of initiatives in vocational education and training aimed at developing more flexible systems of learning, offering greater choice to employers and - more arguably - employees, in relation to the what, how and where of learning. The Frontline Management Initiative (FMI) is one such initiative. A competence-based management development strategy, the FMI places learning within an organisation. It could be considered a critical site for cultivating ideas of lifelong learning and translating these ideas into practice.

Drawing on data collected as part of a national evaluation study, this paper explores the contribution of the FMI to the practice of management learning in selected enterprises. Initially, some discourses of management and learning are presented as background to this exploration. The argument is made that 'identity work' is central to the FMI. Managers not only learn to manage by means of acquiring or demonstrating skills, but also to negotiate particular types of identity with respect to managing – eg business manager, strategic manager, and 'high performing manager'. In other words, they assume certain kinds of social roles; the roles that are proposed for them in the standards set for achieving competency in frontline management. Some participants in the program however, appear to extend these roles, indicating that frontline management can be conceived and practised in a variety of ways.

In analysing these participants' accounts of the FMI, what emerges is a more complex image of managers actively exploring the indistinctness of their role boundaries and constructing various identity positions, including business manager, strategic manager, coach, educator, learning leader, professional developer and organisational developer.

The Frontline Management Initiative: 'new model management'

The last decade has witnessed the growth of new concepts and practices in management and management development in organisations. Managers are increasingly encouraged to take more responsibility for *development*; both the development of individuals and the development of the organisation. Work is increasingly organised around projects and teams and organisational decisions are made in these teams. The 'new model manager' is taken to be more a *coach* than a *cop*; able to implement management practices which build teams, provide leadership, 'empower' workers and harness their knowledge and creativity.

The Frontline Management Initiative (FMI) originated as an initiative of *Enterprising Nation* – or, more commonly, the Karpin Report (Karpin 1995). This report identified an urgent need to upgrade the leadership skills of Australian frontline management. A frontline manager is a person who is responsible for the coordination of the work of others. Frontline managers oversee the actual doing of work: they 'are people who really know the work and are in a position to take something of an overview, to reflect on how things are being done' (Suchman 2000, p 3). They are typically staff

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who are described as coordinators, supervisors, first line managers, junior managers, team leaders, leading hands, office managers and the like.

The FMI is a competence-based management development strategy which places learning within an organisation and links management performance to the achievement of business outcomes. Competency standards form the foundation of this strategy. These standards do not relate to any specific job functions; rather, they relate to a set of skills. The eleven competencies and their elements are as follows:

Figure 1: Frontline Management Competencies[1]

Leading by example	
Unit	**Element**
1. Manage personal work priorities and professional development	1.1 Manage self 1.2 Set and meet work priorities 1.3 Develop and maintain professional competence
2. Provide leadership in the workplace	2.1 Model high standards of management performance 2.2 Enhance the enterprise's image 2.3 Influence individuals and teams positively 2.4 Make informed decisions
Leading, coaching, facilitating and empowering others	
Unit	**Element**
3. Establish and manage effective workplace relationships	3.1 Gather, convey and receive information and ideas 3.2 Develop trust and confidence 3.3 …
4. Participate in, lead and facilitate work teams	4.1 Participate in team planning 4.2 Develop team commitment and cooperation 4.3 …
Creating best practice	
Unit	**Element**
5. Manage operations to achieve planned outcomes	5.1 Plan resource use to achieve profit/productivity targets 5.2 …
6. Manage workplace information	6.1 Identify and source information needs 6.2 …
7. Manage quality customer service	7.1 Plan to meet internal and external customer requirements 7.2 …
8. Develop and maintain a safe workplace and environment	8.1 Access and share legislation, codes and standards 8.2 …
9. Implement and monitor continuous improvement systems and processes	9.1 Implement continuous improvement systems and processes 9.2 …

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Creating an innovative culture	
Unit	**Element**
10. Facilitate and capitalise on change and innovation	10.1 Participate in planning the introduction of change 10.2 …
11. Contribute to the development of a workplace learning environment	11.1 Create learning opportunities 11.2 …

Discursive positioning: the high performing frontline manager

As stated in the introduction to *Frontline Management Competencies*, one of the booklets which forms part of the Frontline Management Development Kit, frontline management competencies 'describe what is expected of high performing frontline managers' (Australian National Training Authority 1998, p 1). The critical words here are 'high performing'. High-performance work organisation is a defining feature of the high-performance workplace. 'A high-performance workplace can be defined as having two or more of the following practices: self-managed teams, problem-solving groups, job rotation, and total quality management' (Kirby 2000, p 31). The FMI seeks to create 'high-performing managers' – in other words, to shape the subjectivity of frontline managers, to make these managers in a particular mould.

Frontline managers are discursively constructed as leaders, facilitators, coaches, creators of best practice and so on. In line with the discourse of high performance, the discourses of identity that wash through these competency standards stress managerial agency – 'participate in, lead and facilitate work teams', 'facilitate and capitalise on change and innovation'. Interestingly, the relationship between learning and managing is somewhat ambiguous. For example, the competencies which comprise 'leading, coaching, facilitating and empowering others' are more commonly associated with educational activity than management activity. Among other things, the frontline manager is represented as a leader of learning and agent of organisational change. This representation embodies a vision of management and learning that has wide appeal.

Each of these subject positions signals that this management development strategy sits squarely within the 'new model management', where the emphasis is on employee learning and development: 'A key feature of (the) transformation in the nature of work is the new, enhanced role for the frontline worker. … Many workers are now asked to contribute their ideas. Quality now depends on everyone involved taking responsibility' (Kirby 2000, p 32). As a management development strategy, the FMI sits comfortably with the kinds of strategic directions that companies are commonly setting today. A national Learning and Development Manager of a large retailer explains the link in these terms:

> Part of our strategic direction is to be innovative and for people to be empowered and so those things are very important. That's how we try to align our learning strategies, so that people take on responsibility for their own learning, so that's one link and certainly the Frontline Management

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> Initiative does that, as well as, you know, it has all those principles. As far as the content, certainly leadership skills are very important and the types of competencies are very aligned to our strategic direction of the company.

Identity work: Negotiating meanings, skills and selves

Michelle's story: 'I am a manager and that's what I am'

Michelle is the Director of a child care centre – a small, not for profit business which provides work-based children's services to a large government organisation. She was one of the first in Australia to undertake the Frontline Management Diploma and successfully complete it:

> At that time, the pilot people would come from the college out to each particular organisation and discuss things with you and do your assessment on the spot in your workplace and they were looking for workplace examples to meet the competencies for FMI. What we found in my case I gather was quite exceptional. For the whole eleven units here, I was able to meet every single competency without doing any work at all, any extra work at all. It was all here in my filing cabinet. I could go there and I could just produce documentation, evidence, and talk about it.

Prior to the development of the FMI, Michelle was enrolled in the Certificate in Small Business:

> So some of us enrolled in that and we did it over a 2 1/2 year period. That was just absolutely fascinating. That was the whole new world and from that point I stopped thinking like an Early Childhood person and looking back on it, that's when I really became a manager.

For Michelle, becoming a manager means that she must stop 'thinking like an Early Childhood person' and start showing 'that we are as good as other business people and managers':

> What I would dearly love to do is to show that people who work in the Early Childhood field are not people who 'muck around with kids all day' because that's what people say to us all the time: 'Aren't you lucky'. I want to show people out there that we are as good as other business people and managers.

Early Childhood professionals work in an industry where little recognition is given to the depth and breadth of their skills. A member of Michelle's staff, and a candidate for the Frontline Management Certificate, speaks to this situation in this way:

> We do a lot more in the room than feeding, changing, playing with the children. We have set goals for the children and we have a program with set activities. It isn't just toys on the floor and have the children crawl around … we do creative things and have learning encouragement.

Taking out a management qualification is one means of gaining recognition and showing 'that people who work in the Early Childhood field are not people who "muck around with kids all day"'. In Michelle's case, achieving the Frontline Management Diploma meant public acknowledgement of the fact that she was performing a managerial role and doing a job equal to any other manager: 'What it

actually said to me was: "Hey, you are doing a job that you didn't realise you could do"'.

The competence that Michelle displays in her job underwrites her identity as a manager. In other words, demonstrating management competence is at the same time negotiating a managerial self as well as negotiating recognition by others of this self:[2]

> Having achieved the Frontline Management Diploma, it changed a lot of people's attitude to what I did. It changed the Committee, and the Committee tends to change each 12 months or two years. In general terms, it's changed the Committee attitude because it's now obvious to everyone because someone externally has recognised that I am a manager and that's what I am, just like my title has been changed recently, nothing else has changed. But the perception is quite different.

The language and concepts of the Frontline Management Initiative are a significant resource for Michelle and her Committee of Management. They provide a platform upon which her identity as a manager can be constructed and shaped: 'My title has been changed recently, nothing else has changed. But the perception is quite different'.

More broadly, the change of title from 'Centre Director' to 'Centre Manager' signals the growth of managerialism within public sector organisations (Clarke and Newman 1997; Pollitt 1993). In other words, it embeds a particular view of management within these organisations. The discourse of management which plays out in these organisations is predominantly a business discourse concerned with commercial growth and development:

> My role just keeps on evolving. I think it is evolving out of frontline management. If I could grow this position more, or this business more, I would, and then I would definitely move out of frontline management into senior management. And then you could have a frontline management layer beneath. That's actually what I would like to do.

For Michelle, identification with the roles and responsibilities of the small business manager is very strong:

> There were questions posed much earlier in the setting up of this place along the lines of 'Is it something we could outsource and you could take over?' but it would be over my dead body, it just wouldn't be, which is sad in a way. The way to make a profit in children's services would be to own or operate more than one centre and you could then have, for example, one, as in staff, for two or three centres and then you would just put someone in to do the day to day running. You could have one cook, one maintenance person. That would be the way to go about it. ... The public has a perception that being with children, there isn't a perception of a business in there at all which is a shame. It can't be anything but a business. It's just a chicken and egg kind of thing.

This identification however, does not exclude interest in the non-business aspects of providing children's services, ie the centre's community and educational roles: 'We do a lot more in the room than feeding, changing, playing with the children. ... We do creative things and have learning encouragement'. 'Doing a lot more' involves running a business and providing an educational service. It also involves working

these seemingly disparate practices together. In Michelle's words, 'It's just a chicken and egg kind of thing'.

Kim's story: 'You end up being a bit more commercially focused without necessarily selling your soul'

Kim is a project team leader within a large TAFE. His work involves managing and monitoring the delivery of full, fee-for-service programs in and to industry. In his former role as a program coordinator, Kim happened upon the FMI:

> At the time I was a program coordinator. I managed the English Language Unit at (x campus). I had been there for five or six years and ... basically (grew) it from nothing to about 70,000 student contact hours. So given the pending changes and my understanding of FMI which was reasonably limited, I figured that when I looked at the competencies I was a typical frontline manager so that was the time to do it, because by the end of that year I might not have been a program coordinator because we knew we had to pack the Unit up in two trucks and drive away.

Given the discourse of managerialism that permeates public sector organisations (Clarke and Newman 1997) such as the TAFE in which Kim works, commercial and business values tend to prevail. Among other things, managerialism involves strengthening management functions, including the establishment of new planning systems that utilise target setting processes, performance indicators, merit pay and appraisal. The FMI, and Kim as a graduate of the FMI, are caught up in this discourse:

> I would say that my planning skills are not so much better but that I plan more. So I see planning much more as an integral part of doing the job. ... That for me is the key thing. The other thing would be ... I am much less afraid of and tentative about feedback in terms of when I was managing feedback from team members and feedback to team members. I suppose I am less likely to feel like everyone has to like me all the time and that feedback is about that.

Something of the pervasiveness of the discourse of managerialism within this TAFE emerges in the following account by a senior manager of the benefits of the FMI:

> I think it highlighted for the people that work in OH&S and people managing them, I think it highlighted the fact that we didn't have the background to be able to manage our business in that area. And I think in financial management as well. I think they are two areas that seemed to show up for a lot of participants in FMI and I think generally people's capability in terms of financial management has improved. I think that has been a benefit. ... I think also that sort of understanding and need to integrate a whole lot of things. Financial management is one, but strategic planning and performance management, about trying to have a complete kit-bag of things to be able to manage. I think that's the other thing that people probably learnt and I think has helped the organisation.

The discourse and practice of managerialism is not unacceptable to Kim:

> To me, when you do it (the FMI), all of a sudden instead of staying within your 1970s cloak and going: 'Ooh we shouldn't have to make profit', you actually just understand: 'Well of course, it has to pay for itself'. Whatever you do has to pay for itself. So you end up being a bit more

> commercially focused without necessarily selling your soul. So you just end up with an understanding of what management is. It doesn't matter who you work for or what you do. (Participant)

Not unlike Michelle above, he appears quite comfortable in a managerial role where, in essence, management means business management: 'I ... basically (grew) it from nothing to about 70,000 student contact hours'. Far from giving a one-dimensional account of himself however, Kim's positioning is circumspect and strategic. The identity he presents at work is flexible or, better perhaps, partial (Flecker and Hofbauer 1998). Thus, he understands himself as 'a bit more commercially focused without necessarily selling (his) soul'. The ambivalence of his positioning emerges in this comment:

> The basic tool and the basic competencies are excellent. I think it is really terrific. If it is done reasonably well, then it does have all these organisational implications which aren't just about stirring. They can be really constructive and they assist in putting responsibility where it should be. Whether that's up, down, or in the middle, it makes no difference. We ran an FMI project at a TAFE in Gippsland. We ran it for them. What they did was the CEO did it first, then his general manager did it, and each time one completed it, they would become coaches for the next level. Fantastic. Not many organisations are brave enough to do it that way.

And, again in the following:

> I think (FMI) was also inadvertently a way of making us be much more outward looking so taking on some understanding about how the rest of the world works. Moving away from just being an education bureaucracy through to a real life business that's got to manage.

Importantly, the move away from 'being an education bureaucracy through to a real life business' is not total: the qualifier 'just' would seem to suggest that Kim maintains a focus on educative work in his managerial role.

As a result of participating in the FMI, Kim has formed a new managerial self in the form of 'fire prevention officer':

> (The FMI) provides definition and parameters around what frontline management really is. It made me shift from seeing my job as someone who ran around with a fire extinguisher in the back pocket putting out spot fires all day every day, to someone who was a bit more of a fire prevention officer, who did a bit more planning, saw planning as a way to avoid that, and it meant that I didn't have to run on adrenalin quite so much.

Kim's identity as a 'fire prevention officer' derives from his need to reduce 'run(ning) on adrenalin'. A personal need is answered by a professional practice (doing 'a bit more planning'). The contrariness evident in the comments above presents itself again. The work of identity is ongoing and pervasive. Kim's identity as a manager appears to be an ongoing negotiation of points of identification: running on adrenalin and doing a bit more planning; adopting a commercial focus and selling your soul; moving away from educational bureaucracy and moving to real-life business.

Author's note

The selections from the interview data which have been made illustrate the idea that 'identity exists not as an object in and of itself but in the constant work of negotiating the self' (Wenger 1998, p 151). From a postmodern research perspective (see Usher 1999, for discussion of this perspective), the story being told through the two case studies is one of strategic and partial positioning within discourses which draw on contemporary meanings of management, but also on other meanings, eg meanings in and around education, community expectations and professional practice. In analysing these accounts of practice, what emerges is a complex image of managers actively exploring the indistinctness of their role boundaries and constructing various identity positions, including that of business manager, strategic planner, coach, educator, learning leader, professional developer and organisational developer. Thus, as a project team leader, Kim both manages and monitors programs and leads learning and development within these programs:

> (X company) is a typical program. X would have a case load and I would have a case load and we see those people on a one-to-one basis to get them ready for assessment and then to follow through with any individual development after assessment.

According to Suchman (2000, p 3), change is always in process at the front lines and frontline managers are 'ideally positioned to be informed agents of change'. Frontline managers fill critical positions within organisations. Arguably, critical positions need to be filled in critical ways. The practice of positioning critically forms one of these ways. This practice might be thought an identity practice. It is an important practice in the production of the identity 'informed agent of change'.

Notes

1. This table is an adaptation of material in The Frontline Management Development Kit. Published and sold by Prentice Hall Australia, this Kit is available in a boxed set including five books plus access to an interactive website. See Australian National Training Authority (1998, p 6).

2. In the practice-theoretical tradition (Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Wenger 1998), competence and identity are intricately entangled. 'Membership in a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence' (Wenger 1998, p 153). In this tradition, learning in practice means negotiating an identity (ie learning is not just the acquisition of skills/competencies).

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